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### Sinkhole conundrum plagues Pa. officials

Saturday, September 25, 2004

**By ALYSSA YOUNG**  
 The Express-Times

NAZARETH -- A task force that formed in February after a sinkhole damaged the Route 33 North bridge reported Friday that quarry pumping contributes to incessant sinkhole activity in and along the Bushkill Creek.

Slowing down pumping is key to reducing the number of new sinkholes that surface, said Gary Hoffman, the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation's deputy secretary for highway administration, during a Friday afternoon meeting at the Memorial Library of Nazareth and Vicinity.

The team of state and federal agencies believes that plugging existing sinkholes in and around the creek and installing an impermeable liner along the stream bed would prevent some sinkholes by reducing quarry dewatering, Hoffman said.

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But officials concede that they must clear several hurdles before they could line the entire sinkhole-prone section of the Bushkill Creek between Hercules Cement Co. in Stockertown and Tatamy. Timing, funding, jurisdiction, liability and concerns from residents and environmental experts are among them.

"I think it's fair to say that we don't have all the answers," Hoffman said.

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Sinkhole activity escalated when Hercules increased its pumping volume from 20 million gallons per day to 55 million gallons per day, Hoffman said. The company uses pumps to remove the groundwater that leaks into its quarry and return it to the stream.

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The task force has theorized that the increased pumping opened more channels in the ground through which water can flow, allowing more water to leak into the quarry and also creating more pockets in the limestone-rich ground. Those pockets develop into sinkholes when the soil above them collapses.

Sealing the holes in the creek with a liner would stop water from running through those channels, Hoffman said.

He said lining the creek is not the ultimate sinkhole solution because it will not stop craters from opening outside its banks. Quarry pumping is only one of several factors that accelerate sinkholes, which are a natural phenomenon in limestone-rich areas. Land development and the installation of utility lines are other contributors.

But, Hoffman said, "We think putting the lining in is better than nothing."

Hercules and PennDOT already have applied to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for permits to line about a quarter-mile of the Bushkill Creek, from just north of the Norfolk Southern Railroad bridge to just south of the northbound Route 33 bridge.

PennDOT estimates the lining beneath the Route 33 bridges will cost about \$500,000.

The agency also plans to install a liner under the collapsed Bushkill Street bridge connecting Tatamy and Stockertown before it replaces that span next summer, Hoffman said.

Hercules last week started work to line two smaller sections of the creek on its property, but the weekend flood washed away the pipes and pumps it had set up. The company received permits for that portion of the project last year.

The sinkhole task force recommends filling in the gaps to create a seamless repair by also lining the stream between the Route 33 and Stockertown bridges and between the Stockertown bridge and Tatamy.

"It would be probably preferable to do it all in one fell swoop," Hoffman said.

State agencies would rely on the Philadelphia district of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to do that work, which PennDOT estimates would cost up to \$5 million.

But Frank Master, chief of the Army Corps' project development branch, said Friday the agency is strapped for cash, and its studies normally take two to three years.

The Army Corps has begun a study to restore the trout habitat in the Bushkill Creek, but it probably has enough money to look only at the stretch between Route 33 and Bushkill Street, Master said.

If the Army Corps later decides to move forward with a construction project, a state or local agency would need to assume responsibility for long-term maintenance, and some local money likely would be required.

No other agency has stepped up to the plate.

"That remains a major, major stumbling block," said state Rep. Rich Grucela, D-Northampton.

Grucela said legislators will try to resurrect an agreement they proposed once before that says the county would back up the state if a state agency partners with the Army Corps.

Officials and legislators also have asked the Army Corps to conduct a broader sinkhole study that would extend beyond the creek's banks.

The Army Corps would need special legal permission to study areas outside the waterway and would require a state or local sponsor to put up 50 percent of the cost, which could cost millions of dollars, Master said.

The Brookwood Group, neighbors who live along the Bushkill Creek between the Route 33 bridges and Tatamy, has urged the state to delay any stream-lining projects until the Army Corps completes its feasibility study on the stream.

Hoffman said he hopes it will wrap up in the middle of next year.

"Let's not waste money by doing all of this if it's not going to work," resident Linda Iudicello said. "You're jumping off of a cliff, and you're not looking to where you're going to land."

If Hercules and PennDOT line the creek only up to Route 33, sinkhole problems may get worse downstream, residents fear. And they want to know who would be responsible for the damages.

"We don't want to be the test project," Iudicello said. "We want to do it correctly for the life of the stream. We want to do it correctly for your infrastructure, even the quarry. We have friends who work at the quarry. We don't want to put the quarry out of business."

She asked the Army Corps to research whether similar stream-lining projects have been completed successfully, and Hoffman promised Iudicello that PennDOT would not move forward with the project if it finds it will have an adverse effect outside the agency's right-of-way.

The Army Corps is accepting written public comments about the Hercules and PennDOT permit application until Oct. 10. It extended the original deadline of today at the Brookwood Group's request.

The group also requested an official public hearing to discuss the permit, but project manager Kevin Dougherty said the Army Corps has no plans yet to organize a meeting.

The state Department of Environmental Protection also is accepting comments on the permit request until Oct. 18.

Also Friday, Sharon Hill, a geologist with the DEP Pottsville District Mining Office, said Hercules has applied for permission to temporarily pump more than its maximum 55,000 gallons of water from the quarry each day.

About 750,000 gallons of water from the flooded Bushkill Creek spilled into the quarry last weekend, Hill said. The company estimates it will take five months to remove the water, she said.

Operations at the company have been shut down since Sept. 18 as a result.

Another remnant of the storm was a new sinkhole that opened this week on

the southern embankment of the Bushkill Creek between the north and south Route 33 bridges, PennDOT spokesman Ronald Young Jr. said.

The sinkhole, about 2 feet wide and 5 feet deep, has been filled with gravel.

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